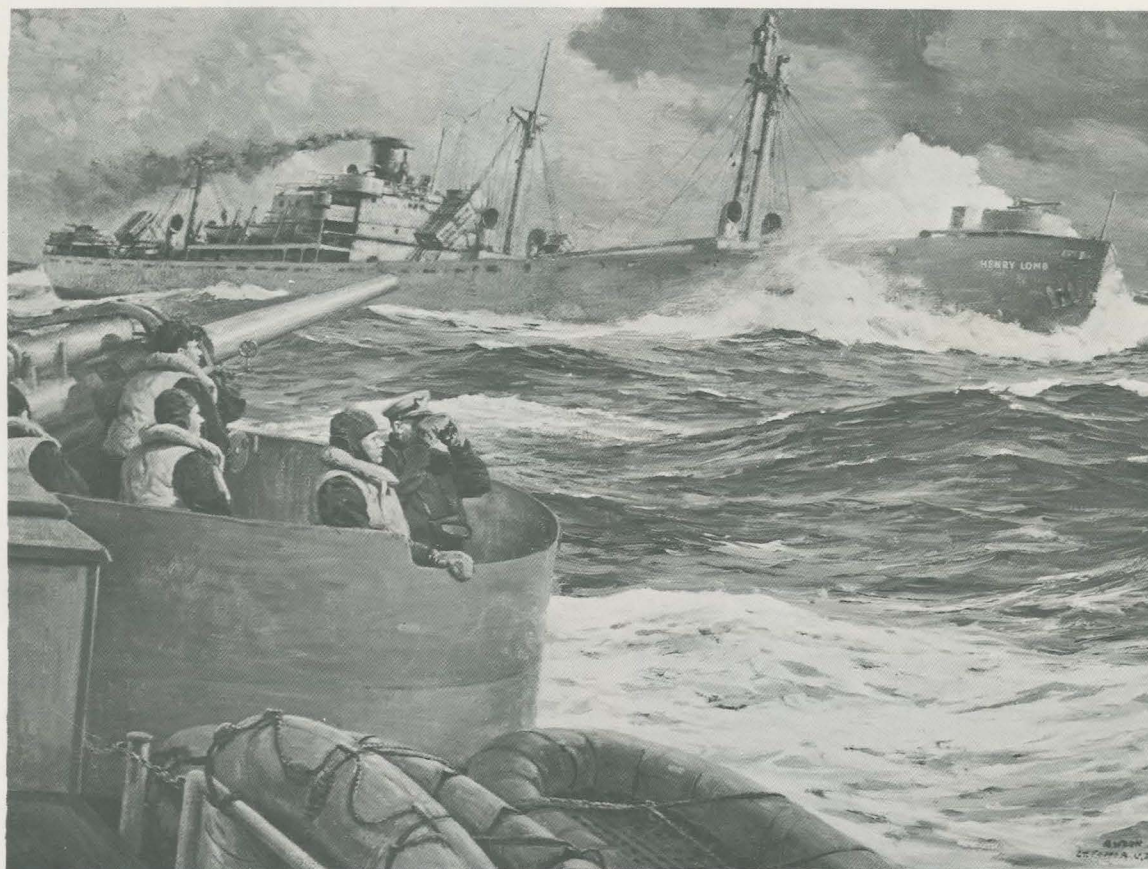


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SEA LETTER

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The Liberty ship *Henry Lomb* makes heavy weather of it in a convoy. Painting by Anton Otto Fischer, courtesy of Bausch and Lomb, Incorporated, Rochester, New York.

Christmas in a Convoy

by Capt. Fred Klebingat

Going to sea had become dangerous — enemy U-boats had been sinking merchant vessels by the hundreds and many, many seamen went down with their ships or perished in open boats in stormy and icy seas. But ashore, shipyards were building ships faster and faster . . . faster than the enemy could sink them. Experienced seamen, especially navigators, had become scarce.

This is the story of a Christmas where *nothing* was the

best Christmas present you could receive. In a convoy of 120 ships crossing the Atlantic in mid-winter with enemy subs around (although this was 1943 and we were beginning to get the best of the enemy), all you pray for is that one day is like the next.

* * *

I had returned from Savannah, Georgia, where I had left

the Liberty ship *William Mulholland* as chief mate. She had delivered a full cargo of nitrates in bulk from Tocopilla, an open roadstead in Chile. I might just as well look for a skipper's job, I thought. But San Pedro, where I was then residing, was the wrong place for that — San Francisco was the hub for such employment. And why pay a fare? So I shipped on another Liberty ship, *George Chaffey*, as chief mate bound for the Bay City. The *Chaffey* had just returned from New Zealand with a full cargo of wool and tallow. She was not a happy ship, but that did not concern me. I was only to be a short time on board, a week at most.

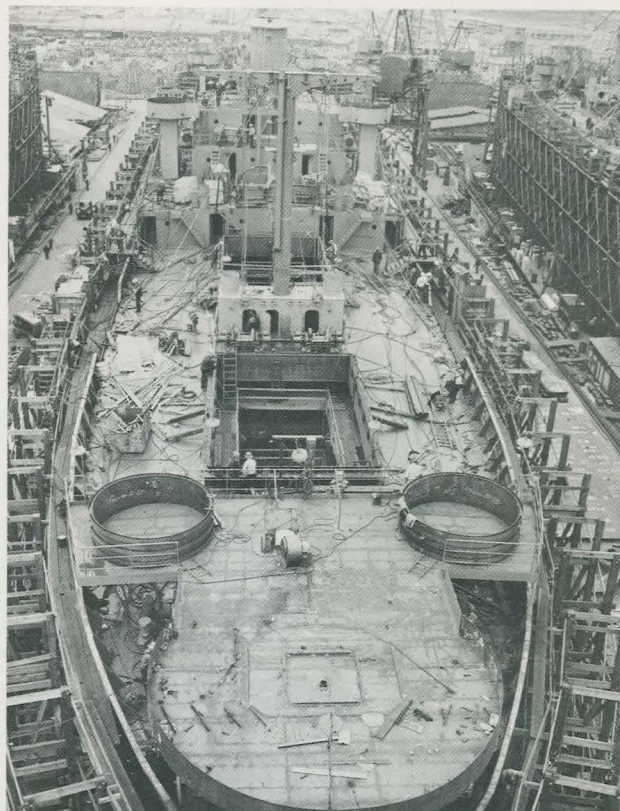
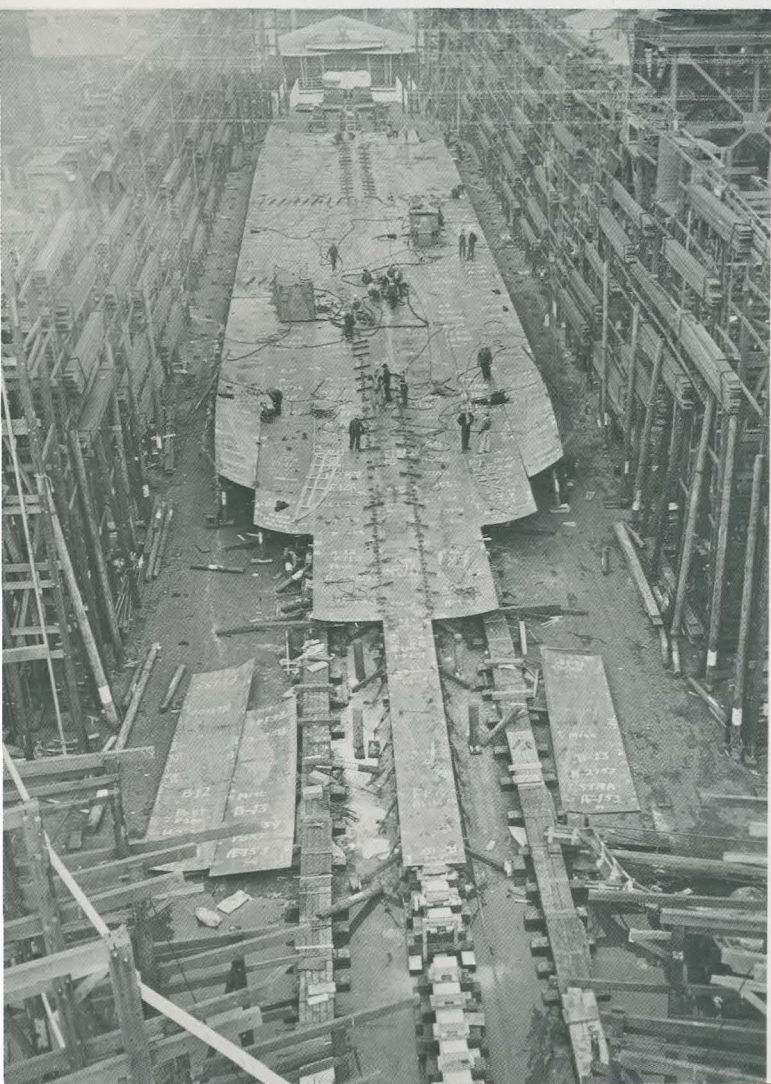
The despatcher at the union headquarters in San Francisco was glad to see me. Skippers especially were less than plentiful. But as I did not land a job on the day of my arrival, he despatched me as night relief mate on another Liberty ship (the name I have forgotten). The night relief engineer was George Cronk, the only surviving officer of the Liberty ship *Stephen Hopkins*, which was sunk by the German raider *Stier*. But this Liberty ship managed to sink her attacker by gunfire so that she also went down.¹ Cronk told me about the voyage in the boat to Brazil from the scene of the tragic fight and sinking. I hoped to see more of this man, but the next day I landed a job as skipper with W. R. Chamberlin.

This well-known old steam schooner firm had an office

"We do not even know if the keel plate has been laid."

The first day's work on a Liberty at the Permanente Shipyard extends beyond the keel into the shell plating.

— National Maritime Museum, San Francisco



The *Oliver Evans*, Captain Klebingat's command, nears completion, April 29, 1943. A pair of gun tubs and the mount for her 5-inch gun can be seen in this view from aft.

— National Maritime Museum, San Francisco

in the Merchants Exchange Building on California Street. With a note from the union in my hand that would introduce me, I entered the deep-carpeted office of the president of the firm, Mr. W. R. Chamberlin, himself. Seated behind a large desk, he was a man in his sixties at least, quite corpulent, clean shaven, with a ruddy face. He asked me about my experience:

"Do you drink?"

I answered no (I surmised that he did not believe me). I was hired.

"What is the name of my future command?" I asked.

"We do not even know if the keel plate has been laid."

I looked surprised.

"You go home to San Pedro. We will call you when the ship is ready to leave the yard."

It must have been about five weeks later when they ordered me to come to San Francisco. I checked out at the San Pedro union office.

"And by the way," says the union agent, "Lenahan would like to go with you as chief mate."

¹ This was one of the most gallant actions in the sea history of our nation. See account by John Bunker in *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, November 1954.

Stephen Hopkins presumably was named for the signer of the Declaration of Independence. An earlier Stephen Hopkins came across in the *Mayflower* and was a leader and survivor at Plymouth during the first winter, 1620-21, when half the Pilgrims died.

Now I did not know that I had ever laid eyes on Lenahan, and I never got around to asking him why he had asked to ship with me. He had but recently been torpedoed on the tanker *Larry Doheny*, sunk by a Japanese U-boat near Cape Blanco. He was mate there. Lenahan was a cheerful Irishman in his forties — somehow I had the impression that in his younger years he had been a chief petty officer in the Navy. It was a pleasure to be shipmates with him. We rode up to San Francisco together on the train. I was complimented by Mr. Chamberlin; not every skipper was able to bring his own chief mate.

My command was the *Oliver Evans*, then lying alongside the outfitting wharf at Henry Kaiser's Permanente Shipyard in Richmond across the bay from San Francisco. The *Oliver Evans* was named for an 18th century American inventor² whose plans for a high-pressure steam boiler (such as ships have as their source of power) were developed simultaneously with those of the famous British steam pioneer, Trevithick. In fact, it is said that Evans' plans were sent to England and influenced Trevithick. Our government, in the selection of names for its Liberty ships, was honoring the country's great, not all of them well known. The first Liberty ship was named the *Patrick Henry*.

Steam was up when I came up the gangway. A tug came alongside shortly after. Pedersen, the tugboat captain, stepped on board. Pedersen was going to act as pilot on her trial trip. It was late that night when we traversed the de-gaussing range in the south bay and tied up at a wharf north of the Ferry Building, ready to load in the morning. I found out later that our pilot was one of the three sons of the notorious, latter-day "hell ship" captain, master of Rolph's barkentine *Puako* — "Hellfire" Pedersen.

The destination of the *Oliver Evans* was supposed to be a secret. "Sh... sh... the enemy may be listening!" But all the cases were plainly stencilled "Bombay" or "Calcutta." It must have taken fourteen days to load the ship; some of the weights were quite heavy. There was also a deckload composed mostly of chassis for Ford and Chevrolet motorcars. There were secured with chains. The Chamberlin firm insisted on this; they were familiar with deckloads in peacetime, as their own ships carried lumber. W. R. Chamberlin Co. for years had bought and sold lumber cargoes, as well as transported them.

During this time I saw quite a bit of the man who had hired me and I became familiar with the office. Chamberlin appeared to run things, but that was not so. The firm owed its success to a woman, Mrs. Nina S. Keswick. She had a reputation as the shrewdest lumber buyer on the Pacific Coast.

The "Boss" himself did not believe that I was a total abstainer, as I have mentioned. So he says one day, "The sun is over the yardarm. How about joining me in a drink?"

"I may at that," I replied, "but my drink is Coca Cola!"

Chamberlin said no more. I stepped out of his sanctuary and saw Mrs. Keswick, who had just a small cubbyhole as office. I related what W. R. had said. She laughed.

"Yes, we have another skipper who doesn't drink. He

2 Oliver Evans built for Philadelphia in 1803 (four years before Robert Fulton's *Clermont*) a combined scow and dredge which ran as a steam automobile on land and as a steamboat in the Schuylkill river.

finds it hard to believe that there are skippers who shun the brimming cup."

When the ship was loaded I signed on the crew with the Shipping Commissioner, cleared the ship at the Custom House with the aid of the broker and proceeded to the Routing Office. The Routing Officer was Commander Petersen, a Naval Reserve officer out of the merchant service.

"You are bound to Bombay and Calcutta," says he, "by way of Hobart, Tasmania."

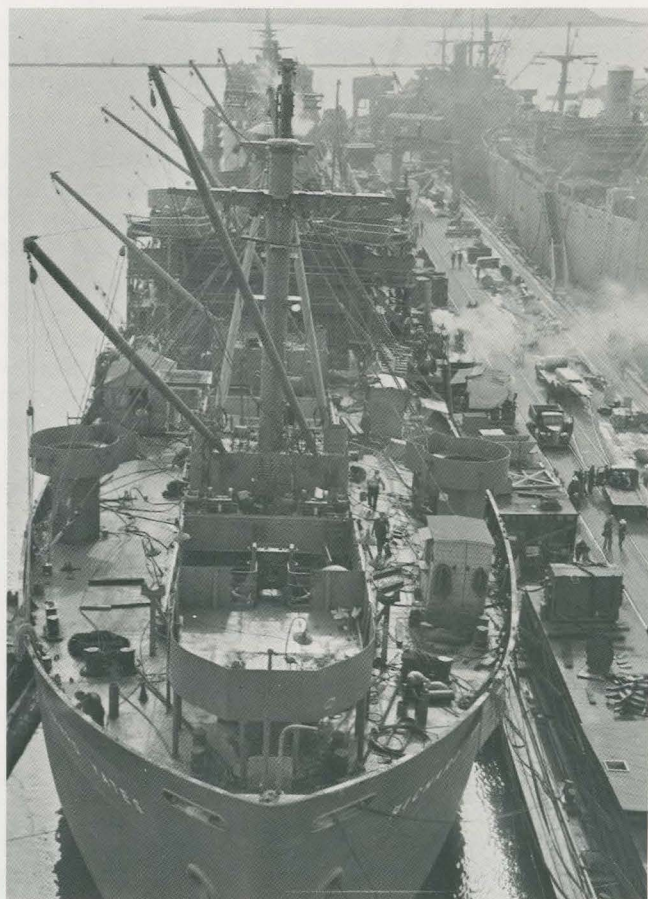
"How did you know," I answered, "that I would like to go there? I have wanted to visit Hobart for thirty years."

The Liberty ship was to use Hobart as a way-point in the same way that the French "bounty" ships did in the early years of the century. There was a boom in French ship-building at that time and more than two hundred steel square-riggers were built in France with the government subsidy. They got a further subsidy for every mile sailed, so, in ballast, they used to take the long route around the Cape of Good Hope to San Francisco and Portland to load grain. I had seen these ships in France in my youth and greatly admired them. Hobart, at the bottom of the world, was perfectly situated as a stopping point for water and stores, and funnel-shaped Storm Bay permitted easy boards, increasingly shorter, as they tacked the thirty miles up to the town. No tug had to be hired.

"My command was the *Oliver Evans*, then lying alongside the outfitting wharf at Henry Kaiser's Permanente Shipyard in Richmond..."

Liberty ships are here seen at the outfitting dock in 1943; the vessel in the foreground is the *Richard Yates*.

— National Maritime Museum, San Francisco



A generation before the French "bounty" ships, American and other whaling vessels had found Hobart equally convenient.

We spent a fortnight refitting in Hobart and went on to Calcutta. When we arrived there, hundreds of corpses were being picked up every morning. A cholera plague was raging. The *Oliver Evans* was given a cargo of tea and three hundred Rhesus monkeys in cages on deck for New York. These were for the Society for the Prevention of Infantile Paralysis. There were several other Liberty ships in port, all with orders for South Africa to load ore. "How do you get a fine cargo like that?" their skippers asked me.

But there is not room here for the story of that passage to India.

* * *

New York, 1943. November was coming to an end.

Just a day or two after paying off the crew who had taken the *Oliver Evans* to India, the American President Lines changed the berth of the ship to Bush Terminal in Brooklyn. The next cargo she was to carry was piled up in the shed. It was marked with the code name "Ugly." That meant that it was a cargo for Great Britain. I knew by this time that we would not be bound for Murmansk. They would have installed a gyro compass if that were the case and put better insulation in the deckhouses and quarters to stave off the cold.

The weather that had seen us up the Atlantic Coast had been exceptionally warm and it continued so. It had helped us carry those Rhesus monkeys in good health. Now it turned cold. I invested in a heavy overcoat. My quarters abruptly were cold, the steam in the heating system seemed to condense before it could get up to the level of the skipper's quarters. I was cold and lonesome. For companionship, I had only the relief mate and the stevedores, and at night the relief mate and engineer, on an otherwise empty ship.

But slowly the new crew drifted on board. There was the new chief engineer, a man born in Denmark; his name was Block. He was the first. Then there was an interval — Christmas would be approaching before the ship was loaded and I wondered where they would pick up additional officers and men. It is always difficult at this time of year; it has been my observation that seafaring men respect Christmas more zealously than their brothers ashore. It is the annual affirmation of their claim on the land; they, too, can be sentimental and remember their origins. And some of course are family men.

But a crew was rounded up. Next on board was the first assistant engineer, a man born in Greece, who had been twenty-three years working at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Then came the second assistant, a Norwegian by birth. He had served seventeen years in the same Navy Yard. And finally the third assistant, a former New York cop who had worked for Uncle Sam for seven years in that same place. The authorities just went through the Brooklyn Navy Yard and looked around. Wherever they saw a marine engineer hiding, they handed him a little slip of paper. With all the ships being built, engineering talent, like navigational ability, was in short supply.

Things were a little better with my deck officers; these, at least, had been afloat in recent years. The first mate was

a young man with a second mate's license, the second mate had no papers at all, and the third mate, a man who had held master's papers at one time, had lost them due to alcoholism.

The men in the fo'c's'le were all Danes, a reliable crew, sober, and they kept the ship in excellent shape. They seemed to be satisfied with everything on board and they stayed with the ship until peace was declared.

For many years I had been in the Hawaii and Southsea trade and at one time I had declared, "Anybody who goes north of San Francisco in wintertime is a fool." With this background and these sentiments, I found it hard to put up with the Eastern seaboard cold. It was intense. On business connected with the ship I regularly visited the American President Lines at their offices on Broadway. A northerly blizzard might be blowing as I walked up the cold canyon of Whitehall Street — a mountain pass in the Himalayas couldn't be chillier. Overcoat tightly buttoned up, I would pass Isbrandtsen's display of coffee in the basement windows. A new cold blast would hit me as I rounded into Broadway. I was glad to enter the agent's warm offices and I rented a room in a hotel nearby where I would be nice and warm at night.

Slowly the ship was loading. There was ammunition of all kinds. In fact, everything that is needed to wage a war. Trucks were hoisted on board already loaded with battle material. This was not a cargo of tea. The hatches were covered and secured, big cases with airplane parts were fastened down on top of them. Abreast of Number Four hatch (the monkeys' hotel), a diesel locomotive was lashed on either side.

The chief ordered the bunkering barge. He himself tended to the filling of the double bottoms and the deep tank in Number Four. I found out that the new chief was very short-sighted. I was told that all at once his tanks in the forepart of the ship overflowed through the vents. What a mess! It took some time before they stopped the pumps on the bunkering barge; due to the cold the oil congealed to the consistency of taffy. That was lucky as it did not flow overboard. It took a gang from ashore a couple of days to clean up the overflow.

The Shipping Commissioner came on board and signed on the men. The deckload was secured. Tugs came alongside and the pilot moved the *Oliver Evans* to an anchorage abreast of Stapleton. Other Liberty ships were also swinging to their hooks, that close that at times they fouled each other at change of tide.

It must have been December 20th when I cleared the ship at the broker's and Custom House. I was ordered to attend the convoy conference next day.

The conference hall was a large room on Broadway. About a hundred skippers, men of all ages, had assembled there when I entered. I found an empty seat.

The commodore, the man in charge of the convoy, entered. We all rose from our seats, as you do in a court when that luminary, the judge, enters the room. He motioned us to sit down. He was a Britisher of medium height and I would say near retirement age. His name was White, Ranking Commodore in the Royal Naval Reserve. He stepped up to a podium.

"This is Convoy (he gave the number) bound for Great Britain. It will make up outside New York tomorrow, December 22nd. Each of you will get a number and also a diagram showing your position in the convoy. I am sorry," he said, "that we have to sail so close to Christmas, but war is war." Then he lectured us on sailing blacked out, dispersing upon enemy attack, and how to reassemble at the next rendezvous. And of course no smoke emitted from our funnels.

"Although radar is invented," Commodore White went on, "we are not equipped with it. It may take some years before it is properly perfected. I urge upon you the importance of station-keeping. And in foggy weather stream the fog buoy so that the ship behind you can follow you. I hope we have a good passage. Good luck to all of us!"

Saying this, he closed the conference. Leaving the hall, each of us received a plan that showed the convoy and the ship's position in it. The plan also gave the name of each ship and its cargo. Then there was the secret code book and another book of wartime instructions. Finally a stadimeter so that you could measure the distance of each ship from your own command. Altogether it made quite a heavy load to lug back to the ship along the cheerless streets of lower Manhattan.

December 22nd dawned with fairly good weather but — cold. Slowly one ship after another hove up anchor and in charge of the pilot made for Ambrose Channel lightship. It must have been about ten a.m. when the *Oliver Evans* was ordered to heave up and proceed to sea. We dropped the pilot. Ahead of us in the distance was the commodore's ship flying the convoy number. She was going slow to give her flock time to come up and assume their numbered positions. This was what was called a "slow convoy," not faster than its slowest ship. It was near evening before we had all assembled. Five ships following in each other's wake, three rows abreast of each other, and extending north and south as far as the eye could reach. Right in the middle of the pack was a baby flattop, the commodore leading all. A couple of deep-sea tugs were trailing behind and about four corvettes scouted ahead and on each wing. Planes from the baby carrier scouted overhead. Every ship was armed to the teeth. Next day some vessels from Philadelphia and Boston joined us. There must have been about 120 ships finally, all travelling at the same speed, all evenly spaced, taking up many square miles of ocean. A grand sight.

My mates, so I found out, were old hands at convoy work and were to be trusted. Although they kept watch on the open bridge, they were well supplied with winter gear, especially my young chief mate, a handsome chap (I am sorry that I don't remember his name). He was engaged to a beautiful lady who held a good paying position. She looked out that her beau was well supplied with an outfit to contend with cold and gales — a quilted coat and pants, heavy fur cap, and boots with heavy soles.

We were lucky to have a fine steward department. I missed my former steward, a black man from Baltimore, but this man was equally efficient. The cooks were busy making ready for the coming holiday. The *Oliver Evans* was under Sailors Union of the Pacific agreement and so she carried a baker. At night he would bake bread, cakes, and pies.

We were somewhere in the right wing of the convoy, the

commodore's ship about three points off the port bow. Ahead of us was a British vessel, the *Empire Nugget*, and astern a Liberty flying a Greek flag. The flag was only as big as a dishcloth, but it gave our first assistant, the Greek, much pleasure and joy.

The weather worsened. It was blowing a westerly gale on the 24th. We were rolling heavily and trying to keep station in the rising gale.

I have always had a policy of trust in those under my command unless I found different. And so I told the mates, "Call me in plenty of time, but take action yourself when it is needed." So saying I went to my quarters and stretched myself out, my abandon-ship kit hanging ready in case it was needed.

Christmas Eve — the ships roll on eastward in the gathering gloom. I am up and about several times. The helmsman on the lower bridge, out of the weather, is in contact with the mate on watch on the upper bridge by means of the speaking tube. I walk to the wing of the bridge. The phosphorescent bow wave and wake stand out against the surrounding murk. I talk to the mate — all is well.

Or so I thought. But somewhere on board there was a Christmas celebration going on out of sight. I did not find out about it until the purser told me the next morning. I was certain there was no booze aboard except what I had in my safe. But somehow the third assistant, the ex-policeman, had become intoxicated. He put on his uniform and made for the gangway, ready to go ashore. It took some effort by his shipmates to subdue him and secure him in his bunk.

"Where did he get the booze?" I asked the purser when he told me about it.

"There is no liquor on board," says the purser. "But the third assistant asked me for some aspirin and I gave him a handful of tablets."

"It is news to me," I said, "that a man can go off his rocker by swallowing aspirin, but in the future go easy on that stuff."

At dawn on Christmas Day I made my way up to the flying bridge, keeping a tight grip on the handrails against her rolling. The chief mate is pacing back and forth, steadying himself now and then with a hand on the bridge railings. I glance around — the ships are in formation, somewhat ragged here and there, but nevertheless in formation. The *Empire Nugget* is in his position ahead of us. But he had been out of position . . .

The mate comes up to me and with his face close to mine, out of the wind, says in a shaken voice,

"I missed that guy by that much."

He holds up his thumb and forefinger to indicate the distance.

He is a calm young man, but it is plain that the close shave in the dark has unnerved him a bit. I pause only a moment to take it all in:

"Don't worry about it, mister. The main thing is that you missed him . . . Merry Christmas!"

He said no more, but continued to shake his head a little in disbelief.



A north Atlantic convoy in heavy weather. — National Archives

And that was the Christmas gift I received in the year 1943. I treasured it. Exactly nothing. *Not* to suffer a terrifying crash, not to hear the rending of metal, not to be spilled out of my bunk. Not to be holed and possibly sunk. Out there in the North Atlantic on a gale-whipped Christmas morning, who could ask for anything more? I lifted my binoculars and searched out the commodore's ship. From her flag halliards was flying the signal: "Merry Christmas To All."

* * *

Because the weather continued stormy and visibility poor, we could not determine our position by celestial observations. And so the convoy was ahead of its dead reckoning by about 120 miles. The corvettes scouting out in front were the first to sight land, the coast of Ireland.

The convoy dispersed as we rounded the north of Ireland and I was ordered to proceed to Liverpool. I never had a minute's trouble with the British authorities. Before arrival (and I was there many times later), I had the steward make up a set of presents of things that I knew those ashore were short of. A pound of sugar or so, a couple of oranges, a square of butter, and a few cigarettes. All the parcels were equal. "Take a package each," I would say as the various shore functionaries completed their business on board. And when I went ashore I always handed the bobby on the dock gate an orange or two: "Thank you," he would say with a salute.

I do not recall in which Liverpool dock we discharged, but on the way there I saw a dock now empty that held what was left of a munition ship. A direct hit by a Luftwaffe plane had done her in. It was lucky for the city that the vessel was in a dock; the explosion blew directly up. Her anchor was somewhere way up town and what was left of the ship was just her keel plate and some parts of frame.

The people I met were getting by, although there were many shortages. If you had lunch ashore, you could not order potatoes if you had at the same time bread or rolls. I liked their bread, wartime bread, baked out of flour that was not sifted or bleached. It had a grey color. I made friends while the *Oliver Evans* was discharging and was invited many a time for dinner. But in that case I brought the main ingredients; I asked the steward for a roast. Although I had become a total abstainer, I always had a case of whiskey on board. "If a case of whiskey can buy you anything, by all means get a case of whiskey," Dr. Oliver, the owner of the *Melrose*, had told me one time when I was in his employ. So, on this run, I always had some whiskey in the *Oliver Evans* safe. Booze was rationed in Great Britain, so I never went ashore to my friends for dinner without bringing a bottle of the "highland dew."

"Why don't you drink?" they would ask me.

"I am afraid of the stuff," was my answer.

I was once a heavy drinker. Prohibition, that was supposed to prevent it, hurt me more than anything else. You drank when you could get it — you poured it down your throat. It cost me \$100 a night many a time out drinking with friends.

There came a time when I was lying in that bed and the doctor said, "Acute alcoholism." I came to the conclusion that there was no middle way for me. I had both shoulders to the mat. I had friends who saw what was going on and who were ready to help me out. And a good doctor. He said, "You have it in you to quit — or you don't."

I quit. It wasn't easy.

I mention all this because alcoholism is a factor in seafaring. There were plenty of examples always on hand. Jack Larsen — I sympathize with that man to this day. He was skipper of the *Star of Poland* and I was mate. He was one of those who had reached a state where I don't think he

truly could have existed without liquor. And the devilish thing was that he could drink all day and never show it. He lost the ship on the coast of Japan when he ran out of booze.

The cargo was discharged and they gave the *Oliver Evans* a modicum of ballast for the return voyage to New York, 1600 tons of sand dredged out of the Mersey river. It was up to the skipper: you could take six hundred tons in the t'ween deck if you wanted to (to soften the roll) and a thousand tons down below. But in truth the whole 1600 tons wasn't enough to prevent the empty ship from floating on the surface of the ocean like an empty barrel.

There was the usual convoy conference. The same commodore in charge. The convoy was supposed to make up in the Minches, between the Hebrides and Scotland. But what with poor visibility, for a while I was in the wrong convoy. There were two convoys coming out of England; I followed one for a half day before I found out it was bound to Sierra Leone. I spent a day chasing to catch up to the right one. I heard later that one ship followed the wrong convoy all the way to Africa.

The second day out the *Oliver Evans* developed trouble with the steering gear. A nipple on the telemotor gear just dropped off. The ship that followed us was commanded by Otto Hengst, a former Pacific Coast steam schooner shipper, one of McCormick's. He complained about my station-keeping.

"I'll fix that," I said to myself. I didn't have a gyro-compass or an iron mike and I didn't want to be pilot fish for Hengst in any case. The signalman ran up the signals:

"Trouble with steering engine. I am asking permission to drop behind the convoy."

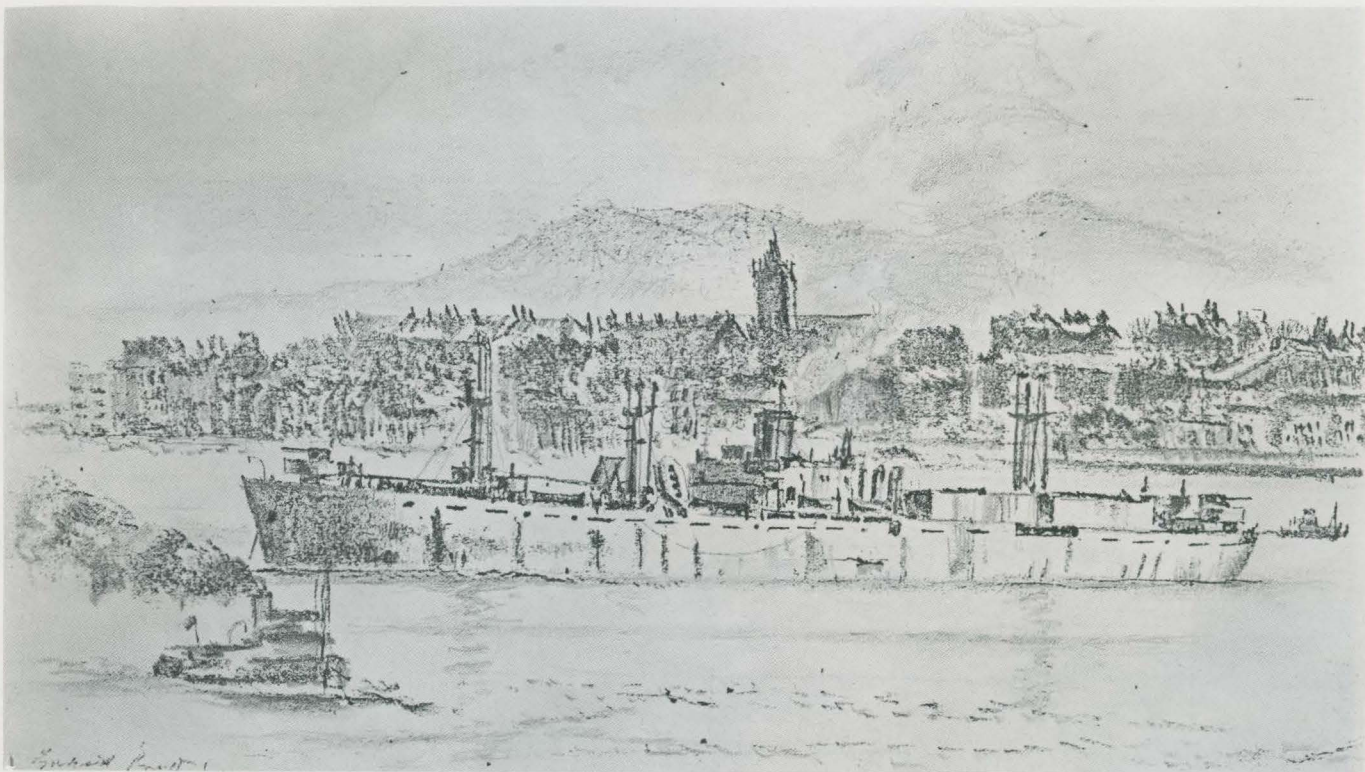
"Granted," was the reply. Hengst did not wave as he passed us. After the column went by, I signaled that I was still having some trouble. The answer came to follow the last ship.

Hengst was always a complainer. He lost the *Munleon* on Point Reyes. His Liberty ship was also operated by W. R. Chamberlin. I heard that he fussed and fussed about getting a pilot house built on the flying bridge. It was never done, but they built one on the *Oliver Evans* without my ever asking for it.

At any rate Hengst did not have to put up anymore with our poor station-keeping. The convoy rolled on, the weather became bad again, a western gale with very poor visibility. The ships — most of them altogether empty — were heading into a heavy sea that was increasing hour by hour. Their bows would rise out of the water, the bottom would become visible and then they would drop with a shattering bang into the sea. No ship could keep this up indefinitely, that was certain. It was dark by this time; the convoy was nearly stopped. Comes an order from the commodore: "Increase speed to 9½ knots."

He was ordering us to full speed! The man didn't know . . . didn't use any brains. We had insufficient ballast and I was concerned about the ship's wild dance. I was worried that she might break up. Alright, to hell with the convoy! I decided it was insanity to force her any more. I decreased the speed. We dropped out of the convoy. Within half an hour the radioman is hearing "S.O.S." on his phones from dozens of ships. "Breaking in two" . . . "Bottom punched

A laden Liberty ship has arrived from America at Gourock, Firth of Clyde, Scotland, December 1944. A sketch by Oswald Brett on a calm winter forenoon from the decks of the *Queen Elizabeth*, where he served as able seaman.



in, floating on tank tops." I remember some names in the convoy — *Amelia Earhart*, *William Manning*, *William Prescott*. One "S.O.S." after another: "Request permission to proceed to Madeira"... "Proceeding to Azores"... "Returning to England." One ship wound up in Halifax.

The *Oliver Evans*, disregarding orders, was now somewhat out of danger, but I knew I had to stop her crazy capering pretty quick or she would injure herself. You get up power, more and more, to hold her bow into the wind. But the pounding is too heavy, so you slack down a few turns — whoosh — the wind blows the bow away.

In my years at sea I have come to the conclusion that the ship knows in what position it wants to weather the storm. She may not want to be head to sea; she may want to lay to with the stern facing it. A Liberty is not as full aft. The stern is of a shape to cleave the seas; it also flares to give lifting power. And she has more weight — more substance — there in contrast to the bow, which is high and empty.

"Stop the engine," I order. I decided you simply can't hold a Liberty ship, empty like that, to a gale of this force.

We will soon see what she wants to do.

Slowly, rolling heavily at times, the ship rounds before the wind. She stops her madcap antics and presently lies as quietly as if in a drydock.

She has turned herself 180 degrees.

"Slow astern," I order.

The engine just turns over enough to make sure she would stay where she was, not enough to start moving her. The wind and sea controlled her, really; like a sailing ship hove to, the bow would be blown a little this way, then that — but the ship gave no trouble. We could have been lying in Oakland Creek.

In the morning all the engineers came up to me and shook my hand and thanked me for the way I had handled the ship — the chief and the reluctant graduates of Brooklyn Navy yard, class of 1943. They were that pleased — they had never seen anything like it. It was no joke down in the engine room when you are forcing the ship against a head sea . . . it could be frightening. You are closer to her bottom than anyone else aboard — when the ship rises up and comes smashing down, it goes right through you. And an engineer must be always standing by the throttle to slow her down when the propeller comes out of the water — otherwise you may do damage to the engine or lose the wheel. They had heard about those S.O.S.'s all around — the radioman kept coming out of his shack with another message, another message, another message. The commodore told the ships to shut up, to keep radio silence (the enemy may be listening). But they wouldn't do it.

"An engineer must be always standing by the throttle to slow her down when the propeller comes out of the water..."

Liberty ship running before heavy following sea in snow squalls. A painting by Oswald Brett, as seen from the *Queen Elizabeth* in the North Atlantic and painted on board, 1944.



The weather improved. We changed the course to come up with the convoy, steering towards what should be the rendezvous. But the convoy was gone. I could now have steered a straight course for New York, but doing so we might have run into a convoy bound eastward. So we tried the next meeting place, but again we fail to sight the convoy. On we steam, sometimes zigzagging, and other times straight course. Nearing Halifax, Nova Scotia, I sight smoke on the horizon. We were not supposed to let any smoke emerge from our funnels. The commodore's orders were very specific about that in both convoy conferences. But the smoke was coming from the commodore's own stack! I laughed. We had found the convoy.

We had been nine days catching up. We noted that there were only half of the ships that formed the convoy in the Minches. We took our place again.

We near New York, about a hundred miles east of Ambrose Channel lightship. It is a fine day, clear and cold. The commodore takes into his head that what was left of his flotilla needed some training.

In comes the order by walkie-talkie, "Emergency right turn altogether 90 degrees at the whistle!"

The commodore's ship blows her whistle. We wheel to the right. Then a ninety-degree turn in the other direction. Ridiculous, parade ground stuff! But the remnant of his convoy — about fifty ships — performs to his satisfaction.

After these unnecessary maneuvers, next morning a howling snowstorm hit us. You couldn't see anything. The order:

"Try to get to Ambrose lightship and anchor."

Just imagine all those ships in the snow seeking an anchorage! In other words, his whole damn convoy was in a mess. I proceeded cautiously. I got a radio bearing on Ambrose lightship so I knew where I was. I pushed on through the snow, taking soundings, and dropped the anchor a couple of miles off. The Atlantic coast shelves down easy; it is no trouble to anchor offshore.

I lay there a half day waiting for orders.

No orders came.

I hove up and went in. The weather cleared as we dropped the hook off the Battery.

A man from Naval Intelligence comes on board to see me. "Hello," I say, "a complaint that I lost the convoy?"

"Not at all," the Navy man says, "We want to know about the commodore. We want to know what happened to that convoy. It has been a disaster and not from enemy action."

I was relieved. I gave him my thoughts on the performance of our commodore. I am sure that he heard similar opinions from the other skippers he interviewed. But I also took the opportunity to point out a basic problem for the westbound convoys — that it is no fun to make a passage in that direction in midwinter in an empty Liberty ship. The Liverpool sand I had in the hold was inconsequential.

There was only one export cargo out of the British Isles during the war years and that was Scotch whiskey. But that was too valuable, they thought, to trust to a Liberty ship. A C-1 in the convoy, the *American Builder*, had a partial cargo. I might remark that there were two Norwegian tank-

ers in the eastbound convoy filled with good quality alcohol to assist in the making of that Scotch. It may seem a little surprising that an occasional tanker was used to ship alcohol into Scotland, but if grain for distillation had been shipped instead, think of the string of Liberties that would have taken.

"Well, we wondered what had happened," said the Intelligence officer, apparently satisfied with my testimony. "I don't recall any convoys that made worse weather of it. The *William Manning*, one of your Liberties, went ashore on Fire Island in that final snowstorm. Another Liberty made St. Johns, Newfoundland and is frozen in. She will have to lie there until spring. In any case, she is broken in two."

To dispel all this gloom I put in a kind word for the *Oliver Evans*.

"Liberty ships loaded are good seaboats," I said. "I have in mind to make a trip or two more with this one. If I get into a spot like the last time maybe I can coax a little more of that Mersey sand out of the agents before setting out. But thinking it over, I have an idea that what would suit me best would be a tanker. When you have tanks, all the ballast in the world is at your disposal, the ocean itself."

Next I had a visit from the Coast Guard. A young lieutenant wanted to know all about our steering failure.

"The nipple on the telemotor just worked loose and dropped off," I said. "It was probably a bit of carelessness by a machinist in the shipyard, maybe a ninety-day wonder of some sort. Everything else was fine — the ship performed well."

But the lieutenant smelled sabotage all over the place. In a day or two I got a formal summons to appear before his superiors. I went up to Coast Guard headquarters on Broadway. The Coast Guard commander before whom I appeared was a woman. She was grey-haired and struck me as quite capable. I went over what I had told the lieutenant about the nipple falling off — a bit of carelessness, a bit of bad luck.

She smiled and dismissed the matter: "Captain, you have to have a little patience with these young fellows — they really don't know anything."

L'Envoi

I did make another voyage across the Atlantic in the *Oliver Evans* and it was considerably less violent. For one thing our convoy was not in charge of Commodore White. But the tanker idea stuck in the back of my mind and I went up to the office of the Masters, Mates & Pilots on Whitehall Street to get some information on my chances of getting command of one.

Someone slaps me on the shoulder: "Hello, Fred!"

It was roly-poly Oscar Belling. From the West Coast. I

first met Oscar about 1910. He was laying back to join the *Coronado*³, but she never started up. Other fellows had the same idea; she was lying off Goat Island. She lay there a long time, but was finally rigged down and made into a barge.

Oscar had a habit that you sometimes found among seafaring men, particularly the frugal Scandinavian and German skippers and chief engineers of the Pacific Coast steam schooners — he liked to make money. An utter devotion to money was much rarer than an utter devotion to liquor among seafaring men, but it did crop up. You will find mention of Oscar in one of my early stories, “A Christmas off Meiggs Wharf.” He comes along East St. carrying his seabag and ready to make a pierhead jump on the old down-Easter *Henry Villard*, by now a tow-barge behind the Red Stack tug *Hercules*⁴ and bound for Panama. Oscar was an able seaman in those days.



“I first met Oscar about 1910. He was laying back to join the *Coronado*, but she never started up.”

— National Maritime Museum, San Francisco

Oscar got caught by the police under a wharf in Vancouver when he was a sailor on the old cutter *Bear*. He was being passed a consignment of opium out a porthole by a Chinese bosun on a Canadian Pacific liner. The police ran Oscar out of town. That didn’t work, but other things did and in time he became a curb stockbroker and left the sea. He was determined to make a million dollars. But the stock market backfired somehow, he lost his shirt, and when he had only \$89,000 left, he went back to sea. For years he was skipper of the tanker *Manatawny* running to Trinidad in the creosote trade.

Sieling & Jarvis gave him command of the old tanker *Toteco* in the Venezuela trade when the war came along. That’s what he commanded when I met him at Masters, Mates & Pilots. Oscar bought enormous numbers of cigarettes for speculation at the South American end. The subs

still had it their way those days; they would pick off a tanker ahead or astern of Oscar’s old crate in the convoy. But the *Toteco* wasn’t worth wasting a torpedo on and Oscar sailed on with his slop chest. He disposed of it to the Collector of Customs at his port of discharge in Venezuela at enormous profit.

I would like to report that Oscar’s devotion to money-making came to a sublime end. But the truth is that he didn’t make the million he intended. When he died of a kidney ailment in Marine Hospital in San Francisco, he left \$800,000. Poor Oscar — he never married as he was afraid his wife would run away with his dough. In his will he remembered all the wives of his seafaring friends (except mine), \$500 to this one, a thousand to that one, and the rest of it to a sister in Germany who couldn’t get it (at least she couldn’t last I heard; she was in East Germany) and a brother in Australia who didn’t need it.

“Oscar, just the man I’m looking for,” I said to him in the union hall. “You know all about tankers. I want a tanker . . .”

“Why?”

I’m tired of crossing the Western Ocean in empty Liberty ships standing on end.”

A tanker, returning empty, simply pumps into her tanks that amount of the ocean that she feels she needs to put her down in the water and keep her steady. It is free ballast — the sand or soil or mud loaded in a dry cargo vessel by clamshell bucket is seldom free and it costs money to get it on board. And more money to get it off again.

“It should not be so hard to get a tanker,” said Oscar, matter-of-factly. And sure enough, a month later, I was skipper of the T2 *Apache Canyon*. My first voyage was to Venezuela and then we took our place in several fast convoys — 14½ knots — across the Atlantic. One to Liverpool, but most of them to Scotland, up the river Clyde. All tankers, about sixty of them at a time.

The firm that operated the *Apache Canyon* was Amoco. I was ordered to load in Curacao and then proceed through the Panama Canal to the South Pacific, the first of their fleet to do so. I carried my oil to Manus in the Admiralty Group (the former Seeadler Harbor of the Germans, now a giant U.S. Navy repair facility) and later once to Ulithi in the Caroline Islands, the advance base for the assaults against the forces of Japan. The greatest armada the world has ever seen⁵ was anchored in that vast harbor ... and tankers by the dozen bringing oil in, fifty or sixty of them.

The *Apache Canyon* never went further west than Ulithi. At different times I delivered my cargoes to Hollandia, Langemak, Dreger Harbor, and Milne Bay. I still wonder how we managed to get through to those places safely — dark nights, no lights, rain, running full speed. I recall one nasty run with no pilot from Dreger Harbor to Milne Bay, doubling Cape Nelson on the coast of New Guinea — all twisting channels through the reefs.

The *Apache Canyon* provided me with the most comfortable berth I ever had. At the same time there was a sense of accomplishment — she was an efficient ship and we kept her that way. She had a friendly feel; you liked doing

³ The iron barkentine *Coronado* was formerly the bark *J. C. Pfluger* and originally the ship *Waikato* belonging to a celebrated firm in the colonial trade, the New Zealand Shipping Company. She was built in Sunderland, England, in 1874.

⁴ The steam tug *Hercules*, 414 gross tons, built 1907, is preserved by the National Maritime Museum, San Francisco, at the Hyde Street Pier.

⁵ Admiral Morison says in *Leyte* that in mid-March, 1945, just before the Okinawa operation, there were 617 vessels anchored in Ulithi lagoon.

things for her. The *Apache Canyon* made dozens of runs across the Pacific with oil loaded at Balboa. Sometimes we locked through the Canal and loaded at Curacao. We didn't have any trouble; the other tankers had trouble. One reason was Mr. Hegelberg, the chief engineer. He was an old Associated Oil Co. chief, a West Coast man. The main difficulty with the T2 tankers was leaky condensers. A tanker put into Papeete and declared that she couldn't go on until she got new tubes. They had to fly in the tubes and fly in the men to install them, but I still smell something fishy about the timing of this breakdown — in Tahiti a good time would be had by all.

When our tubes started to seriously fail, Mr. Hegelberg declared that the *Apache Canyon* could not make another voyage unless they were replaced. Not with ordinary tubes, but cupra nickel tubes, the very best kind.

The port engineer for the War Shipping Administration at Balboa came aboard and this serious matter was broached to him.

"Have you got any whiskey in the safe? Hand me a couple of bottles. We'll talk about it . . ."

At the end of a lengthy afternoon's discussion it was agreed that the chief would have his cupra nickel tubes.

A tanker can be generous in deck space and the quarters aboard the *Apache Canyon* were not crowded. The radio-man and I had the boat deck to ourselves. I had a sizeable office, a big bedroom, and an oversize bathroom. A beautiful ship, well finished, built in Mobile, Alabama. Good furniture.

As long as I went to sea, I always had flowers. In the schooner *Melrose* I had hanging plants and potted plants in the skylight and elsewhere in the cabin. As I settled down on the *Apache Canyon* I outdid myself in this regard. Putting to sea from Balboa, I carried cut flowers, too. The tanker was, in the old sailor's expression, a true "home from home." I had canaries. One of the A.B.s, a former Navy man, was also an ex-tailor, and my quarters were made comfortable with drapes, fancy covers for the furniture and fancy cushions. And books — there was lots of time for reading on those long hauls across the Pacific.

As a schoolboy in Germany, I excelled in botany and it has remained an interest of mine. I visited the United States Botanical Experimental Station at Summit, Canal Zone, and took with me Haden Mango plants, breadfruit trees, and also what are known in Honolulu as "Rainbow Showers" or "Golden Showers," varieties of *Cassia Fistula*. Through an agronomist, a Lieutenant Maxwell in Dreger Harbor, New Guinea, the mango plants were presented to the Catholic Mission in Langemak Bay. I went back to the Botanical Station in the Canal Zone many times and developed quite a nursery on *Apache Canyon*.

The naval officers boarding the ship in the Southwest Pacific never seemed to want to leave my quarters, what with the plants, the canary birds, the carpets and upholstered chairs and settees. It made them homesick.

We kept the ship up. I had good crews — one crew for more than a year, until we were ordered to San Pedro one time. I had a fine mate, a Russian, Mr. Magnusson, an A-1 tanker man. But all things come to an end — ships and men. That thought didn't prevent me from being bitter when, after all that work, my fine ship was turned over to

Niarchos, the Greek tanker king, brother-in-law of Onassis. There wasn't a speck of rust on her. Niarchos renamed her *World Triumph*. I heard she was broken up in Italy a few years later.

It's funny, that tanker. I think a lot about her. She represented a certain kind of perfection. I am basically a sailing ship man — I stuck with them to the end; I thought they would last me in my time. But I have a soft spot in my heart for the *Apache Canyon*. I have a hunch that ship had a soul, for all of being mechanically propelled.

The *Oliver Evans*, I have an idea, had a soul, too. It had something to do with durability — the growing realization that this assembly-line ship, one of two thousand seven hundred all built the same, was not going to fail us — she was going to get us there and get her cargo there. And perhaps it was not her doing, but she did stay out of trouble that Christmas morning.

Oliver Evans (for whom the ship was named 150 years later) may have invented a high-pressure boiler, and the high-pressure boiler may have eventually driven my first love — sail — from the seas, but I say that a steamship can also find its way into a man's affections.

Airplane pilots will tell you that even an airplane has a soul, so maybe my hunch is right.

This recollection by Captain Klebingat was written in 1982 at the age of 93. He lives in Coos Bay, Oregon.

This Christmas issue of the *Sea Letter* was produced by the staff of the National Maritime Museum, Golden Gate National Recreation Area, and funded by the National Maritime Museum Association.

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After nearly 7 years of preparation, the National Maritime Museum Association opened the historic World War II submarine *Pampanito* on March 16, 1982 with a formal presentation at Pier 45. On hand for the ceremony were City and State officials, and Navy brass including three Congressional Medal of Honor winners.

In her first eight months of receiving the public, *Pampanito* has played host to some 175,000 visitors; has taken in over \$441,000 at the box office; paid some \$25,000 to the Port for dockage, and provided new jobs for a dozen or more San Franciscans. On one recent day *Pampanito* averaged nearly 2½ persons per minute for 12 continuous hours.

During the nearly five years of operation since the Association gave its collection and the sailing ship *Balclutha* to the National Park Service, the Association has continued by contract with NPS to manage certain portions of *Balclutha's* operation, thereby benefiting NPS and especially the new National Maritime Museum with gifts of over \$400,000 in goods and services — mainly employments in the Museum proper.

In addition to the above services, the Association has granted some \$13,000 to the restoration of the World War II Liberty ship *Jeremiah O'Brien*; \$7,500 to the completion of Joseph Conrad Square; over \$5,000 toward the publishing of the story and cataloging of artifacts from the *Niantic*, the

Gold Rush ship whose remains were found when developers excavated a site at Clay and Sansome Streets; and \$14,000 to the publishing of *Sail and Steam*, a 50-year record of newspaper accounts of sailing ships and steamer trade on the Pacific Coast.

The Association looks forward to a sound financial and historically active year in 1983, despite some serious loss in attendance at Fisherman's Wharf due to the discontinuance of the cable cars as well as the general business recession.

As guardians of the public trust, our Board of Trustees continues to pursue the difficult task of providing the wise decisions necessary for fruitful returns on our historical investments.

I have enjoyed serving as your President during 1982, and I wish to acknowledge the invaluable assistance provided me in my job by my Officers and Board members, the Executive Director and his staff, and the hundreds of loyal members who have given of their support over this year.

Cordially,

Thomas B. Crowley
Thomas B. Crowley
President

**The Trustees and Staff of the
National Maritime Museum Association
wish you Joy and Peace
through the Holiday Season and in the year ahead . . .**

The World War II submarine *Pampanito* being towed to her berth at Pier 45, Fisherman's Wharf.
— National Maritime Museum, San Francisco



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